





SELF-GOVERNMENT FOR LONDON.

THE LEADING IDEAS

ON WHICH A

CONSTITUTION FOR LONDON

SHOULD BE BASED.

A LETTER

TO

THE RIGHT HON. H. A. BRUCE, M.P.,

(SECRETARY OF STATE FOR HOME AFFAIRS,)

FROM

CHARLES BUXTON, M.A., M.P.

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PREFACE.

My object in writing the following Pamphlet is to stimulate, so far as I can, the action of the Government, in preparing, without needless delay, for the creation of a Constitution for the Metropolis. But also to enforce what I am persuaded are the two leading ideas upon which any such Constitution should be shaped, viz., that,—

I. For the administration of all her great metropolitan affairs, the whole of London should be formed into a Corporation, on the usual model, with a Lord Mayor at its head.

II. For all minor local purposes, the ten Parliamentary Boroughs already existing should be raised to the condition of Municipal Boroughs, each of them with an organization of whatever kind may be thought most appropriate, but complete for the management of its separate affairs.

I had intended simply to republish a speech I made on the subject last session, in moving the second reading of two Bills—one, a Bill for the creation of a Corporation of London; the other, a Bill for the establishment of Borough Municipalities. I found, however, that for my present purpose, that speech required so much modification that I could only retain certain portions of it, and it seemed more convenient to throw my views into the form of a letter to the Home Secretary.

SELF-GOVERNMENT FOR LONDON.

MY DEAR BRUCE,

I am well aware that the Home Office is more overwhelmed with business than it ever was before, and that you are already pledged to bring in several Bills of vast importance. I should therefore feel some scruple in addressing you on the subject of the self-government of London, but that, in answer to my motion on the subject last session, you promised that in the course of the next two years you would bring in a Bill for creating a system of administration for the Metropolis, and it was upon the understanding that you would do so that I consented to withdraw the Bills I had brought forward. I believe you intend, without delay, to begin the investigation of this very difficult and complex subject; and I think therefore that this is the time to excite some discussion as to what shall be the main principles on which any ideas for the self-government of London ought to be based.

The thing we aim at is neither more nor less than this,—to get rid of the state of almost anarchical confusion by which the administration of the Metropolis is at present disgraced, and to bestow upon her 3,000,000 inhabitants a well-

balanced, well-organized system of representative self-government.

Now any scheme for effecting this purpose, necessarily divides itself into two parts. First, and foremost, comes the question, what system of self-government shall be organized for *the Metropolis as a whole*? The second question, one of less importance, but of greater complexity, is what system should be adopted for the administration of the comparatively petty local affairs of the minor portions of this vast city? Some, indeed, have alleged that all affairs, of all kinds, might be managed by the one central government; but I think that every one who has really gone into the subject will allow that a broad distinction must be observed between the government of the Metropolis as a whole, and the government of its separate localities. There are a large number of matters which would be managed more extravagantly, and less efficiently, if they were in the hands of a great central government, than if they were in those of the local authorities.

I. This, then, is the first, and it really may, in every sense of the word, be called the grand question, what should be the form of government provided for London, as a whole, for the administration of her great metropolitan affairs. At present no such government exists. The only attempt at an approach to it is the Metropolitan Board of Works; but the functions of that Board are so limited that it cannot, for a moment, be

regarded as a municipal government of London. I believe that the proposal I brought forward last session, in accord with the Metropolitan Municipal Association, is the one that must, and will ultimately, be adopted, viz. :—That London should be formed into one great Municipality, with a Corporation, formed according to the usual model ; with Councillors elected by all the ratepayers, simultaneously with the election of their local authorities ; and with Aldermen and a Lord Mayor. That Corporation would, in the first place, become invested with all the functions of the present Metropolitan Board of Works ; and among the functions of the central government thus created would be the control over the police and over the whole administration of justice ; over all sanitary measures ; over the improvement of streets and public works of all kinds, including sewage, gas, bridges ; over gaols and asylums ; and so forth.

There is not, so far as I can discover, any practical difficulty whatever in the way of adopting this portion of the whole plan. I believe that it would not tax the strength of Her Majesty's Government at all severely if they were at once—during this very autumn—to make arrangements for the construction of such a Corporation, and then to bring in the requisite Bills next Session. The vast size of the Metropolis undoubtedly affects the secondary question—how to deal with the smaller local interests ; but it does not make any material difference in the conditions of the

creation of a Corporation for the whole. What has been done in Liverpool and Manchester, and Glasgow and other great cities, could be done without any serious difficulty in London. We have ample experience to guide us. We are already well aware what dangers to avoid, what difficulties have to be encountered, what preliminary steps have to be taken.

II. But when we come to the second question—what arrangement should be made for the government of the several minor portions of the Metropolis? we have not the same experience to lead us, and the real difficulties of our task begin. The proposal of the Bill I brought in last Session was, that while for Metropolitan purposes we should create a Corporation of the whole Metropolis, for the administration of the separate local affairs, we should accept the division of London into the ten boroughs, which already exist, for Parliamentary purposes. There being at the present moment ten Parliamentary boroughs in London, our proposal was, that these ten boroughs should be converted into Municipal boroughs as well, complete for all purposes of local self-government; each of the boroughs being supplied with a complete machinery for the administration of all its minor separate interests.

The nine new Municipalities, in addition to the City proper, that would thus be created, would be as follows:—Westminster, which would retain its prescriptive title of City, containing at

the present moment, in round numbers, 260,000 persons; Chelsea, 200,000; Marylebone, 473,000; Finsbury, 423,000; Hackney and the Tower Hamlets, containing together 710,000; Lambeth, 320,000; Southwark, 204,000; and Greenwich, 193,000; and then there is the City with 130,000; making ten boroughs, with a population averaging 300,000 in each, and in the aggregate amounting to all but 3,000,000 of people.

There would obviously, I think, be very great advantage in thus taking the Parliamentary division as the basis of the Municipal division; and I feel confident that the more carefully the Government consider the subject, the more clearly they will perceive that so far the proposals brought forward last year were sound, and that any scheme for giving self-government to the Metropolis must adopt these leading features. I am more diffident as to the particular form of government that should be adopted for these divisions. The Bills I brought forward contemplated the creation in each of these boroughs of a complete Municipality, a Corporation with a Mayor at its head, aldermen, councillors, &c., so that London would, in fact, have consisted of a Federation of Municipalities. I admit, however, that it is open to question, whether it would be wise to give such an elaborate and dignified form of government as this to these boroughs. The objections to doing so are no doubt considerable; but, on the other hand, this arrangement would possess

some great advantages. I will not, however, now discuss this point: I am anxious that it should be understood that this question as to the name and shape of the government given to these boroughs is altogether a secondary one. The two points on which stress ought to be laid are these:—First, that the whole Metropolis should be provided with a Corporation:—Secondly, that for local purposes of administration, London should be divided into ten boroughs, each of which should be complete for all purposes of local interest, Parliamentary and social.

This scheme appears to me to commend itself more thoroughly than any other to good sense; but other propositions have been made by men of high authority, and I will endeavour to place them before you briefly, but with entire candour, so that you may be able to judge between them and the one set forth above.

One of the plans that has been propounded is that advocated by the Metropolitan Board of Works, who very naturally wish the vestries and so forth to remain as they are; that the boroughs should not be endowed with municipal functions, but that the powers of the Board of Works itself should be enlarged, so that it should become the supreme authority over all the affairs of the Metropolis. There is one fatal disadvantage in that scheme, namely, that it takes no account of the existence of the City Corporation, which would not consent to that supremacy of the Board of

Works: whereas, the City has looked very favourably on the plan above proposed. But even if that difficulty were got over, the suggestion of the Board of Works, though it might supply a strong government for London as a whole, would do nothing whatever to introduce order and good government into the chaos of conflicting jurisdictions in the several parts of London. Then comes the proposal that emanated from the present Lord FORTESCUE, when Member for Marylebone. That noble Lord proposed a series of bodies governing the whole of the area, but each devoted to one great work, such as works, police, lighting, drainage, and improvements. That scheme was highly ingenious, but I need not discuss it now, as it is not pressed forward. Then there is the proposal made by my hon. friend the Member for Southwark (Mr. LOCKE), who recommended that we should simply take the City as a nucleus, and then divide the rest of London into wards, which should elect their aldermen and councillors like the wards of the City proper, thus simply adding them on to the City as bees might add new cells to a honeycomb. No doubt there is an air of simplicity about that arrangement which is very attractive. In ancient times the City generally added one ward after another, and if that system of inclusion had not been stopped, by this time the City would have absorbed the whole of London. It is clear, however, that there are fatal difficulties

in the way of adopting the proposed arrangements. For example, if the new wards were of the same size as the old ones, there would be such a multitude of them, and, consequently, such a host of aldermen and common councillors that no building could contain them. On the other hand, if the new wards were a great deal larger than the old ones, there would be great and well-founded dissatisfaction; if, for example, Westminster were only put on the same footing as one of the smaller wards in the City. Then there is another proposal which found favour with the Committee over which the Secretary to the Treasury (Mr. AYRTON) presided. The proposal of that Committee was, in fact, a revolutionary one. It altogether ignored the existence of the City Corporation, and started off as if we had a *tabula rasa*, with nothing already in occupation of the ground. I cannot think that this proposal was characterized by statesmanlike prudence. It would be very unwise to add so enormously to our practical difficulties, as we should if we attempted to sweep away a system so ancient, so venerable, so powerful as that. The Corporation of London is already engaged in the work of its own reformation, but it would be utterly unreasonable to make a reform of the City a necessary stepping-stone to the creation of a constitution for the Metropolis, with which it has no necessary connection.

It seems to me that the plan of taking the Parliamentary boroughs, and giving to each of them a complete organization for the management of its local interests, would be at once more simple, more practicable, and more effective. It matters comparatively little, whether each of these divisions shall be governed by a Corporation with a Mayor at its head, or by Vestries, or in whatever other way may seem best. The essential thing is that each of them should have a well-defined boundary of self-government, so as to be “*ἀντάρκης*” for all the strictly local purposes within that boundary ; while, again, they should be all combined in a Federation, with a central government at its head, for the administration of the great purposes common to the whole Metropolis. This scheme is not a revolutionary one: it would develop, enlarge, create, but it would not destroy. One important advantage in it would be, that it would leave the City intact, except that the Lord Mayor would cease to be called Lord Mayor. He might fitly receive the title of Deputy Mayor, and in the absence of “The Lord Mayor of London,” the Mayor of the City might be, *ex officio*, his substitute, and step into his place in case of his demise. It would be only fair too that the existing Lord Mayor of the City, at the time when the change is made, should be the first “Lord Mayor of London.” With this trifling exception we should let the City alone. She would

retain her privileges, her precedence, her property, and her organization unaltered. She would simply be the first and foremost of the ten London boroughs. Our plan would absorb the City Corporation just as the Kings of England, in building the Tower of London, incorporated the ancient White Tower, instead of razing it to its foundation and laying out the ground afresh. In the Bills I moved last session, arrangements were made by which, in every case, those who now hold office in the Metropolis would have the opportunity of occupying places analogous to those which they now fill, but of far greater importance, and, in most cases, of greater emolument as well. And no doubt the Government will adopt similar precautions in any plan which they may adopt.

The details of this scheme are immensely voluminous, and I believe you will find that they have been most carefully and judiciously considered, and every contingency and circumstance provided for in the Bills I brought forward last session, but for the drafting of which (a most laborious task) the whole credit is due to Mr. JAMES BEAL and Mr. LUDLOW. It would be premature at present to discuss these details, many of which involve questions of great nicety. All I want to do now is to set forth what I believe you will find to be the true basis on which any plan for the government of London must rest, viz.:—First, that the

Metropolis, as a whole, should be provided with a Corporation formed in the usual manner. Secondly, that, for all local purposes, London should be divided into ten boroughs, each completely organized for the administration of all its separate affairs.

I know well that you are fully conscious of the absolute necessity of no longer leaving the 3,000,000 inhabitants of the Metropolis without a government. The importance of making provision for the due administration of her affairs is immensely enhanced by the position which London occupies as the centre of this great Empire, as the heart of our body politic, through which every current of life flows without ceasing. Every year the Metropolis occupies a more and more important position in relation to the rest of the community. Every year our whole political and social system becomes more and more thoroughly organized, and therefore every part is drawn into more and more intimate relations with the centre. And looking to the future, it is evident that Middlesex will, ere long, contain what might be characterized as a powerful nation. It has been calculated that, ere this century closed, she would contain a population of from 5,000,000 to 6,000,000 of people. One might well have expected that the Metropolis of such a country as ours would have itself exhibited, though in a smaller area, that wonderful power of organization, that wonderful aptitude for self-government, and that resolute determination to manage its own

affairs, which has so eminently distinguished the English people. Strange to say, the very opposite is the truth. Strange to say, there is not I believe, in all Europe, a Metropolis—there is not in the whole of this kingdom a town or city—whose system of administration is in a state of confusion so preposterous as that in which the capital of the Empire is plunged. No one who has not gone deeply into the subject could believe the state of things which now exists. It is chaos itself. It might fitly be described in the words in which John Bunyan described the Valley of the Shadow of Death, namely, that “It was every whit dreadful, being utterly without order.” As Mr. BEAL observed in one of his very able speeches on that subject:—“The humblest corporate town has had powers conferred upon it which are denied to the Metropolis of the Empire.” “Nothing,” said the *Edinburgh Review* of last January—

“Is more discreditable than the anarchy of London and its circumjacent cities; nothing more unworthy of a nation, which professes to govern distant empires, than the fact that the government of its own capital is in the hands of a mediæval Corporation, and of Parochial Boards, all at war with each other.”

And it proceeded earnestly to advocate the establishment of a complete system of municipal government in London, and the introduction of an effective control over the whole system of local taxation. It added:—

“A municipal government of the Metropolis being established on a proper footing, the great questions of pauperism, crime, police, public works, water supply, markets, sanitary improvements, and local taxation, would, of course, be dealt with by it.”

The *Quarterly Review* and many leading newspapers had written in the same sense. What the *Edinburgh Review* called the “anarchy of London” comes mainly from this, that instead of its being cut into certain defined parts, and each portion being complete in itself for the administration of all its local affairs, new districts seem to have been formed for carrying out every new purpose that has at any time arisen. Thus, London is divided into thirty-nine districts for one purpose ; into sixteen for another ; ninety for another purpose ; fifty-four for another ; besides a multitude of other divisions. It is differently divided for the police, and for the Police Courts ; for the County Courts ; for duties under the Registrar General, under the Building Act ; for postal, militia, revenue, water, gas, and Parliamentary purposes. And those districts cross and interlace each other in a manner almost reminding one of Dr. Johnson’s definition of network, that it is “a decussated reticulation with interstices between the intersections.”

At the present moment more than one hundred Acts of Parliament are in force for the government of London, and there are no less than seven thousand honorary officials, besides a host of paid

officials. I need hardly say that this variety of authorities and of divisions and subdivisions overlapping and crossing each other, the confusion of their powers, and the cross purposes of those endowed with them, involve the ratepayers of the Metropolis in a vast amount of needless expense. It has led to much litigation ; and, above all, such a state of anarchy not only implies extravagant outlay but extreme inefficiency as well. We pay heavily and we do not get any adequate return for our outlay. As an illustration of the extravagance of that system, I may mention that evidence was given before Mr. AYRTON's Committee, that to spend £10,000 in the Strand district, cost in mere friction £3,000.

We have, in the two cases of Marylebone and Westminster, a signal illustration of the economy that resulted from the consolidation of powers. It was shown before the Committee that Westminster, from its numerous subdivisions of vestry action, expended £10,000 more than St. Marylebone in administering an equal sum—£200,000—collected in rates. Now, nearly £3,000,000 of money is collected and expended by these local powers. Which would be most economical—to have thirty-nine staffs for one purpose, or ten—to have a multitude of authorities acting without concert, or to have all powers consolidated into ten administrations complete for all purposes? I would put it to any residents in the Metropolis, what their own personal experience is with respect to

its government. Is there one among them who knows anything about the administration of their local affairs? For my own part I can only say that, although I have considerable interests in the West but still more in the East of London, I have not the faintest idea when I pay my rates, (which I seem to be always doing,) who those are by whom I am governed, how or why they have been chosen to govern me, on what grounds they have imposed upon me that expenditure, or whether it is or is not a reasonable and wise one. The system has no real publicity. It is worked almost in the dark. In fact, we do not govern ourselves, we are governed by others without practically being in any way consulted.

Now what I want is, that every ratepayer in London should be the citizen of a borough, choosing those who are to administer the whole of the local affairs in which he is interested, and that those thus chosen should administer them under the eye and in the presence, as it were, of their fellow-citizens. I do not mean, however, to find any fault at all with the vestrymen, guardians, and other existing officials. It is not the men, it is the system that I blame. On the contrary, I think that all have great reason to feel sincere gratitude to those who make such sacrifices of time and labour for the benefit of the neighbourhood in which they live, and who, in many cases, do their work so well. Nor do I want to oust them from their functions. I want to consolidate

their powers and to give them so complete an organization that there should be no waste of such valuable force. In every way it could not but be an evil that the administration of affairs should be thus cut up into pieces and be conducted on so small a scale, instead of the whole of the local affairs of each large division being conducted by one governmental machine. Very small government is rarely very good government. It is almost impossible, as Mr. MILL has well observed, to have a highly-skilled administration on a minute scale. It can neither be paid enough nor watched enough to make it first-rate. Government on a large scale always has a more vigorous life. It is more powerful, more rapid, more intelligent. When local administration is too much broken up into fragments, there is always great danger of its getting into the hands of men unfit to take part in any work of the kind, and the very obscurity of its operations acts as a powerful encouragement to jobbery, to parsimony, and that which is the twin-sister of parsimony—absurd extravagance.

Now, it seems unaccountable that hitherto the people of the Metropolis should have been content to remain floundering in a condition of chaotic anarchy, while new towns, such as Adelaide or Chicago, founded by English emigrants, have a system of self-government as perfect as any the world has seen. It is the more extraordinary, because one portion of the Metropolis has for so

many centuries had a very complete organization. I refer, of course, to the City proper, which occupies so conspicuous a position in this country, and yet, in reality it is the merest fragment of the Metropolis itself. The contrast between the two is most striking. The area of the City consists of 723 acres, while London covers more than 80,000 acres. The resident population of the City by the last census is 130,000, as against 3,000,000 in London itself. The assessment of the City is, in round numbers, £2,200,000 per annum, as against £17,000,000 for the Metropolis as a whole. Yet that small portion of the Metropolis is the only part which has a definite self-contained administration. Now, if each of these ten boroughs were supplied, as proposed, with a complete machinery for self-government, and then above and beyond that we have a Corporation of the whole Metropolis, a Council formed from the *élite* of the Municipal Councils; were that scheme carried out, who can doubt that we should then secure the services of a very superior class of men for work of such great interest and importance?

I shall not be misunderstood if I say that I wish to see London governed by her aristocracy, not, indeed, by an aristocracy of mere wealth and rank, but that she should be, as the word really means, under the rule of her best citizens; that the ablest, the most honourable among them, should aspire eagerly to take a share in the control of her affairs. And there is no man

resident within her borders, whatever his social position, who might not well think it a worthy object of ambition to be the head, or to be one of the chief rulers, of a capital of such transcendent dignity and importance. Why, if for a moment we could look on London as separate altogether from England, and think of her rather as Athens, or Rome, or Florence, under the Medici, as a community by herself, was there ever yet seen on the face of the earth a city so truly the first of all cities, in wealth, in power, in art, in science, or in literature, in the vastness of her enterprise of every kind? Again, if we regard her as the head and centre of the British Empire, was there ever a city whose sons bore sway over the destinies of so great a multitude of nations? Was there ever a city so truly the foremost leader in the progress of mankind? Why is it that those who live in such a city—in a city in many ways so fitted to kindle enthusiastic love of admiration—why is it that they feel no touch of that civic patriotism which has always in other illustrious cities characterized their children? At present a Londoner scarcely dreams of looking upon London with interest and pride and affection, as his own mother city, with whose life his own is bound up. He has no feeling of intimate connection with her. The population of London is a mere aggregate of so many individuals, but is not organized as one great whole. We are not, as it were, members

of a body politic, and that, undoubtedly, is owing to our having no system of self-government among us. If we had an organization of the kind that I venture to propose, it would call forth the faculties and the virtues of citizenship ; it would kindle our dormant interest in the well-being of our capital, and it would be found that men of business, leading tradesmen, merchants, manufacturers, Members of either House of Parliament, men accustomed to handle the machinery of government, would be as ready, as Englishmen have invariably shown themselves, to sacrifice their leisure for the delight of doing work so worthy to be done ; and there would revive among us that feeling of pride in this mighty city by which, in the middle ages, her citizens were marked ; and while standing and looking on the roofs and towers with which even the banks of that river will before long be crowned, we might once more speak of London as

“ Urbs speciosa situ, nitidis pulcherrima tectis,
Grata peregrinis, *deliciosa suis.*”

The object we aim at is that every ratepayer in London should have a share in choosing the men by whom he is to be governed ; should have a voice in the employment of the funds taken from his earnings ; should know upon what ground he is required to part with them. Our aim is—and I, for one, will never rest till it is secured—to substitute in the government of the

capital of the Empire order for confusion ; clear and codified laws for the tangled mass of more than one hundred Acts of Parliament ; to substitute defined and well-marshalled powers for the swarm of disconnected authorities ; to substitute publicity for obscurity, economy for extravagance, liberality for meanness, force for inefficiency. I trust the Government will not delay to bestow the priceless boon of a complete and well-organized system of representative government on the 3,000,000 inhabitants of the Metropolis, forming a community which even in mere numbers already exceeds some of the nations best known to history, but, at any rate, a community second to none in greatness, in dignity, and in power.

I am, my dear BRUCE,

Yours very faithfully,

CHARLES BUXTON.

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